

Winter 3-10-2021

Atlas Planted

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ATLAS PLANTED

BY
ANNELISE BELMONTE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF DESIGN, COLLEGE OF COMPUTING AND
DIGITAL MEDIA OF DEPAUL UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN GAME DESIGN

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

2021

DePaul University
College of Computing and Digital Media

MFA Thesis Verification Form

This thesis has been read and approved by the thesis committee below according to the requirements of the School of Design graduate program and DePaul University.

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* A copy of this form has been signed, but may only be viewed after submission and approval of FERPA request letter.

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ABSTRACT

In “Atlas Planted,” the game world plays as a life theater production where the storyline is influenced by player and other characters in a metaphorical and literal gardening mechanic. The emphasis on selfish vs selfless action serves as a critique of social responsibility and objectivism, the philosophy developed by Ayn Rand where each person is their own hero. According to that philosophy, if everyone were free to pursue their own greatest desires without directly harming others, the whole world would be better for it. In the case of these characters, how they pursue their core desires are influenced by Curiosity, Mistrust, Subservience, and Reclusive tendencies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This game was a Herculean effort, and I am so grateful to all those who helped me shoulder it instead of shrugging and letting me be crushed under the weight of ambition.

My thesis partner Ardian Amiiti's tireless efforts breathed life into this game and the graduate program in a way that framed the world as endless possibilities. He integrated asset dumps, implemented new mechanics, merged rewrites, and fixed bugs as only the best kind of "seed" and partner can.

Many thanks to Caleb Foss, my endlessly thoughtful committee chair, who guided me through color theory, art history, and philosophy in game design to discover how to best reach a broad audience while cultivating a deeper understanding of myself, design, and society. No ideas were too big and no details were too small for my wonderfully engaging designer, professor, and advisor.

I am incredibly grateful to committee member Peter McDonald, who could've cut the cord when he found a great opportunity beyond DePaul University, but instead doubled down his efforts and motivated a small group of our cohort almost every other week, giving us realistic goals, support, critiques, and inspiration with his incredible know-how and generosity.

Thank you to my committee member Anna Anthropy for suggesting I keep my game concise and grounded so as not to smother players under symbolism and rambling metaphors. Hopefully, I succeeded in bringing that humanity she implements so well in her own projects into my own stories.

Thank you to committee member Will Meyers for helping strengthen our AI and visualize a vertical slice to keep us on track.

In addition, I'd like to thank to my fellow MFA candidate Jes Klass, whose friendship tended my wilting soul and encouraged me to grow professionally and as an empathetic human being.

Thank you to all my professors, classmates, visiting speakers, coworkers, and critique partners for helping me blossom throughout my time in the MFA Game Design Program.

But most of all thank you to my parents, who always encouraged my imagination with their endless love and support, and to my husband, who lent me his shoulder and voice for this project.

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CHAPTER 1

Description of Game

The player is presented with an atlas of game world knowledge. They are visiting the estate of a human who brought their imaginary friend to reality and started a family with them. These family members give off energy that serve as seeds and influence. Each member of the family has a section of the garden with plots, and their core values are shifted based on what's planted. The AI pushes characters to weed out influences and literal plants they don't like, tend to others to help them survive, or steal and guard seeds so the player can't get to them. Players can harvest mature plants to get more seeds, though wilted ones can only be cleared. Players can move freely about the garden. Characters do the same, playing through the scenes with each other without directly acknowledging the slightly voyeuristic player gardener. The dialogue and scenes play out differently based on the characters' values. At the end, the garden either closes to outsiders, certain characters leave, or they've come to terms with how to enrich the estate and their own lives.

CHAPTER 2

Statement of Intent

American culture emphasizes popularity, productivity, and self-made success. In many ways, so did Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy about how ingenue go-getters and "Atlas"es of the world should be above morality and social boundaries. With the surge of social media, members of society have become consumers and products that need to "sell" our skillsets and energies, which is incredibly fitting considering we're in a capitalist society. But so many of the common milestones that are associated with "success" involve a feedback loop—most often in the form of customers, friends, academics, and strangers on the internet.

What happens when people don't necessarily value the energy you put into the world and yourself?

In "Atlas Planted," director Ardi and I set the stage with a branching narrative affected by player engagement as opposed to dialogue choices. But I also wanted players to question if and how they matter—then play with how that empowers them towards the "imaginary solution" to finding fulfilment, both for society (the player) and the individual (the characters, but specifically, Rayne). The player can tend to the garden for the quick gratification of harvesting energy or observe the family with the same detachment/investment of watching a reality tv show played out like live theater. No matter what the player's productivity or attentiveness, the story goes on, as does the game world.

The core wants of the characters never change, but the way they react to stressors does. If a player focuses on or neglects the gardening mechanic, they may sense urgency, annoyance, or gratefulness that other characters take over or that plants wilt and die. In the end, the way the characters choose to react to and engage with society is drastically altered based on what kinds of exploitation and encouragement they've been exposed to on a regular basis.

Each imaginary character represents a potential pitfall and resource towards how to engage with society. Curiosity: chasing dreams, interacting with anything that catches their fancy. Mistrust: Protective, shrewd, and brave. Subservience: Helpful, hopeful, and diligent. Recluse: Productive, calculating, and lonely. The player can't control any of them—they can't even technically plant in the greenhouse. But I hope that by participating in these stories, they'll recognize these energies in themselves and in others. As Rand said in *Romantic Manifesto*, "[Art] tells man, in effect, which aspects of his experience are to be regarded as essential, significant, important. In this sense, art teaches man how to use his consciousness. It conditions or stylizes man's consciousness by conveying to him a certain way of looking at existence."

My intent is to encourage players to question objectivism, and instead of shrugging off social responsibility, this game will generate enough empathy to inspire players to encourage and "plant" it.

CHAPTER 3

Rules and Instructions

The digital game file must be downloaded via Mac or PC. Once in the game, players can use the mouse to select arrows to navigate or pan screens such as book pages or the garden itself.

Clicking on the base of sparkling/mature plants will provide more seeds automatically to the basket. Seeds can be dragged and planted in certain plots of land, at which point they grow on a semi-random basis. The “I” button or clicking on a plot pulls up an inventory basket where players can drag seeds to bring them to other rooms, then drag them out again. If the basket is onscreen, pressing “I” again will dismiss the basket and any seeds still in its inventory mesh.

Clicking on the “Atlas” book brings up or dismisses character pages where players can track values. The characters will continue to act out scenes and manage the garden throughout gameplay. The game never really “ends” so much as the player either gets kicked out of the garden or continues to watch the characters interact with their own AI once scenes have run out and all the characters have talked about their future.

Pressing escape exits the game no matter which screen you are in. The slider at the top adjusts text speed.

APPENDIX 1

Supporting Documentation 1

Screenshots:







Annotated Bibliography 22/01/2020

For my thesis project, I intend to study the psychology of projection and the subliminal nuances of what makes something “uncanny.” We often project our passion into the art we create in an attempt to master it and explore parts of society, tech, and ourselves. Does one master their mind or their relationships in real life when they rid themselves of imaginary friends? What goes into creating them? What is the relationship between that realm of reality and this one?

Writers such as Stephen King have explored the darker aspect of fictional characters “leaping off the page” to change their story such as in his story *Dark Half*. Imaginary friends may wreak havoc in self-sacrificing attempts to bring their person “joy” again like in *Inside Out* and *Drop Dead Fred*. Supposedly perfect dolls come to life in kid movies like *Life Size* (or don’t in films like *Lars and the Real Girl*). In those examples, the protagonist is often fighting for their own autonomy or looking for a savior when things seem to be spiraling. Does having an imaginary ally give someone the illusion of more autonomy and how so? When they leave or are dismissed from memory, how does independence or the “art” of the creation change when others register that character?

In the case of my real childhood friends, imaginary companions were created from a more base desire to have someone to play with or try to reframe something from someone else’s point of view. Perhaps they were used to test out interactions in the relatively safe confines of their mind. Imaginary friends are not a ghost or an echo. That kind of playfulness can be spooky or playful, depending on the context. My readings will help me discover how to straddle that line and build it up to a truly memorable experience where the players should hopefully learn more about what they view as human and what they don’t. How can constructed companionship aid or hinder development? By learning more about psychology, not-quite-human synchronization, and TTRPG vs digital experiences concerning empathy and game experiences, I hope to create a truly exploratory game that leads to a greater sense of self and other.

Kamm, Björn-Ole. “A Short History of Table-Talk and Live-Action Role-Playing in Japan: Replays and the Horror Genre as Drivers of Popularity.” *Simulation & Gaming*, vol. 50, no. 5, 2019, pp. 621–644., doi:10.1177/1046878119879738.

This article explores the development of horror role-playing games in the Japanese context with the online video platform *niconico*, a website that allowed tags and comments to generate simultaneously along media to create a shared user experience. The fieldwork was as recent as 2015-2018 in LARP communities. I found this article useful because it discusses how by using a single room, multi-player experience horror games can cultivate a unique and memorable experience that draw users back in for another adventure using “replays” and uploading their experience. I am debating the use of a LARP for my horror project vs a digital experience and the ways one can emulate either using the other medium. This article demonstrates that LARPs may not be as economically successful as their digital counterparts which is also a consideration in the development of my thesis project, however, they keep up a loyal “fan base” more than other games because of an investment in the lore and excitement of a shared experience.

If I do make my thesis game an TTRPG, it may help to have a “replay” ready on hand to entice players into that world.

Spittle, Steve. “Did This Game Scare You? Because it Sure as Hell Scared Me!” F.E.A.R., the Abject and the Uncanny. *Games and Culture* vol. 6 no. 4, 2011, pp. 312-326.

This article explores the rhetorical ways in which F.E.A.R. (Monolith, 2006) produces uneasiness about generative power of the self and the unknown. Spittle uses Freud to assess the political Othering of the (surprise) Mother character as a gendered figure and the patriarchal ways the character must cast out elements to survive and in what ways some things may never be purged from our “selves.” The distortion of self and other blends together in horror so the player may confront death. Identity and uncanny behaviors will be prevalent themes in my thesis project, which is also a horror game. If the game will be digital, the protagonist’s sense of self in relation to their parental figures will be a central narrative arc in that there is always a sense of “uncanniness” to the self when one evolves, similarly to the aberrations in F.E.A.R. According to Freud, Kriesteva, and Spittle, what is not a home/womb reminds us of an impending sense of the tomb/death. In my game and thesis, the unusual form of the “birth” of imagination will have potentially demented ends.

Klimmt, Christoph, et al. “Effects of Soundtrack Music on the Video Game Experience.” *Media Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 5, 2018, pp. 689–713., doi:10.1080/15213269.2018.1507827.

This article outlines prior studies on music affecting player enjoyment and experience in film and games. In a survey of 64 young adult males, music has been found most effective when funneling in a spatial presence and identity for the player/viewer. For example, sea shanties and swashbuckling tunes in Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed: Black Flag* made it easier to get into that time frame and associate the play experience with that of a pirate; however, music in the horror game *Alien: Isolation* did not associate the players with the character so much as increase fear. Music and soundtrack did not have any significant effect on enjoyment of the game. Increased horror did not lead to increased enjoyment of the game which is good to know as far as narrative design for my thesis project.

Nogueira, Pedro A. and Vasco Torres, Rui Rodrigues, Eugénio Oliveire, and Lennart E. Nacke. *Vanishing scares: biofeedback modulation of affective*

player experiences in a procedural horror game (2016). *J Multimodal User Interfaces* 10:31–62

In this article, Noguiera et. al. discuss how the physical affects of imagination or gameplay change the way a player interacts with the game. Music therapy can adjust posture in an almost Pavlovian response and in the realm of horror games can be particularly effective. The study in this article attempts to use an emotion engine (e2) to decode players' biofeedback in relation to real-time game events. Often, sweat and heart rate are used to monitor potential arousal and fear, two potential elements in my thesis game. The study asked if a scary situation could be manipulated to a predetermined experience using biofeedback and is it more effective for certain types of players. From this study, they determined that a player's experience level and proficiency in games tended to polarize or exaggerate their emotions associated with horror in general.

Tinwell, Angela, et al. "Uncanny Behaviour in Survival Horror Games." *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, pp. 3–25., doi:10.1386/jgvw.2.1.3_1.

This article explores the unease with which people perceive virtual characters with human attributes visually and audibly by testing roughly 100 people with 12 video clips of virtual and live characters. Characters who were the least synchronized seemed the most frightening, however, some characters who were clearly presented as nonthreatening were considered cute and reminded players of childhood imaginary play. The "imaginary" characters in my thesis project are going to need the subtle varieties and genre of the uncanny as documented in this paper to build upon the potential horror of reality and imaginary colliding.

Vachiratamporn, Vanus, et al. "An Analysis of Player Affect Transitions in Survival Horror Games." *Journal on Multimodal User Interfaces*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 43–54., doi:10.1007/s12193-014-0153-4.

By monitoring heart rate, facial expressions, and mouse activity during player experiences, the authors were able to determine that scares worked best when the player had been built up into a suspense state by uncanny behavior, music cues, and a general awareness that their actions affected the enemies and environment. The article uses past research of biofeedback not only to clarify what the four stages of fear are: *safe, caution, terror, and horror*—the last three of which correspond to *anxiety, suspense and fear*. Although their research was very thorough, their sample size was only eleven, so I will take their analytics of the genre in general into more account than their research on audience reaction to *Slender*.

Cuddy, Luke. *BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book*. John Wiley and Sons, Inc, 2015.

This book hosts a myriad of wonderful essays on reality, necessity, the essence of the self, and phenomenology amongst many other things. The first chapter, [*BioShock's Meta-Narrative: What BioShock Teaches the Gamer about Gaming*](#), explores managed schemata of loss of avatar control, camera angles, and spatial awareness to increase unease or anxiety in a player to create memorable and meaningful gaming experiences. The irony of the loading screen music selection brings the player to a time of optimism, consumerism, and possibly careless, all of which led to the dystopian underwater city they're stuck exploring for a philosopher and society crushed under the weight of the American dream, madly scrambling to harvest what power is still to be had. Creating meaningful game experiences and pacing them well within horror to create that sort of static crescendo of unease is part of the tapestry I would like to weave with my thesis project, a meta experience without necessarily having the character talk to themselves to point out the ironies in its own world. How can I help the player understand things well and what does that mean? This article helps clarify some of those questions to push my thesis and game to the next level.

[*Chapter 2 The Value of Art in BioShock: Ayn Rand, Emotion, and Choice*](#) by Jason Rose discusses more of Ayn Rand's philosophy that "society benefits most if everyone is free to act in their own enlightened self-interest, with 'enlightened' here referring to fair play and mutual respect for one's peers" (Rose, 16). Truthfully, I may use Rand's book *Romantic Manifesto*, because this essay has its own wonderful insights in how her Objectivist philosophy is applied to the horror genre and BioShock in particular, one standout quote is about how an artist can project their ideal re-creation of reality into their art and *art* is a way to make more concrete our view of society and ourselves. I think the play on imaginary companions has a *lot* to do with projection of ideals and this particular philosophical lens by *this* author and Rand will help inform me how best to form that idea for my thesis.

Badhwar, Neera K. and Long, Roderick T., "Ayn Rand", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/ayn-rand/>>.

Although I shall be reading Ayn Rand's philosophy directly ("Man's Rights" being the most likely to apply to my thesis), as a philosopher, she only replied to fans instead of academics or potential protests. This article thoughtfully dissects her theories and critiques from others in an organized manner that will make wading through her unique form much easier to comprehend, drawing upon the arguments' natural tension to promote further discourse in the realm of what it means to project ideals without heeding protest.

Other ideas to explore:

- Identity as a burden
- Paternal/Maternal bonds
- Personality Disorders
- Energy and friendship
- Imaginary Friends

Game Thesis Proposal: Imagine That/The Garden of Atlas

As a designer, I am motivated to present narratives that allow players to engage in an emotional, narrative arc that will prompt them to view their own behaviors in real life. I am curating a way to better equip to explore questions and conflicts about their participation and perception with their egos and society. How do people engage with self-worth? How do our projections shift with different people depending on our values?

I'm hoping by letting players explore these questions in the game space of an interactive storybook/shadow puppet story, almost like a point and click adventure, they can carry their observations about themselves and society outside of the magic circle of the narrative's rules and reality. Hopefully, players' choices will evoke a sense of compassion and intrigue as the game world changes before them as a result. The player will have already experienced a mix of fear, failure, love, excitement, and heartbreak, and come out the other side with their minds prodded and opened to personal growth.

My thesis project will activate this design position by setting up a conflicted philosophy within the setting of a "play" where a girl living in a secular, Objectivist society, is dissatisfied with her own ambitions and ego, so she seeks support and inspiration by creating imaginary companions that materialize as her new "family" that society/the audience, react to, within the context of the Garden they live in. Although the girl is supposed to pursue selfish desires, she secretly craves approval of society who would ideologically disapprove of this goal.

As the play goes on, the imaginary family and the girl, who becomes the Mother, will "bloom" and "wither" in the garden as they all make their mark on it. Some characters will change more than others based on how Society views them, much like some plants require more care or sunlight than others. It's not a question of nature vs nurture so much as the conflict of selfishness and altruism, of callousness and sensitivity in a realm where "ourselves" is all we're supposed to need. How does one feed or fail that need? Not only in themselves, but in others?

The Narrator will prompt the audience for reactions and input about certain aspects of the narrative, almost like a parent reading a story aloud to a child or an actor in a child's play addressing the audience. The player can click on certain ambiguous items on the storybook pages to explore outside of the dialogue, but for the most part their interaction will be dialogue responses to the Narrator, putting the player in the role of Society.

For example, when the girl plants a seed with her Friend and the child sprouts, the player can choose predetermined response options as to what it looks like or how it makes them feel, almost like elaborating on a Rorschach test. For example, the sapling/child could initially look like a boy, girl, tree, or perhaps society might say it's twisted or still growing, therefore they are unsure what it would be. Although the child will emerge as a female, how society responds to it will affect how they view themselves and how the Mother interacts with them. Is she more protective and cautious? Hands-off and encouraging?

Characters subtly acknowledge the presence and opinions of Society, although they never directly interact with the player. The Gardens (the main family) may shift their attitudes and ego depending on the input of the player. Characters met with antagonism may be desperate or hostile. The game is crafted to test the characters and players in a spectrum of motivations along altruistic and selfish projections of an Objectivist society that slants against contemporary US

suburbia. Framed as a dark fairytale, the players will experience the joys, failings, and possibilities of projecting and pursuing a role in a society that watches and reacts to them.

Philosopher Ayn Rand built Objectivism as the ideal that every person lives for the Ego, the Self, without sacrificing their own happiness, least of all for the undeserving, but to let their achievements trickle down to benefit others as it benefits them without envy or malice. It's an impossible ideal for mankind, even in Rand's own novels, because Man (not just Men) will think and behave in irrational ways that they are not always directing with their values over their emotions. Sometimes, they are linked.

Where is room for loneliness in a Randian world? Does that make someone weak and unlovable until they build their own self esteem by finding others they admire reflecting their values back at them? Even then, doesn't that conflict with the idea of the self's achievements and virtues being what fuels the ego? Every perception we make can affect someone's happiness, including our own, so it seems like an impossible task she set before Man.

In Rand's novel "Anthem," the protagonist starts the journey feeling undeserving in a socialist society where they are delegated to be a street sweeper instead of a scholar, their true passion, and find serving in this role to be a lonely punishment despite the omnipresent "us" they have been indoctrinated to think of first. "We are alone here under the earth. It is a fearful word, alone. The laws say that none among men may be alone, ever and at any time, for this is the great transgression and the root of all evil. But we have broken many laws. And now there is nothing here save our one body, and it strange to see only two legs stretched on the ground, and on the wall before us the shadow of our one head."

The Garden's protagonist struggles with the separation of "Us" from her imaginary companions, rationally assuming she cannot part from them as they are a part of her more than anyone else. She is meant to think of the "Ego," and yet before the imaginary companions, felt just as lonely and undeserving as an "I" as the protagonist of "Anthem" did as a "We." Thus, the Mother created her imaginary companions when there was a shift in her social support in real life to try and project a different, more valuable ego.

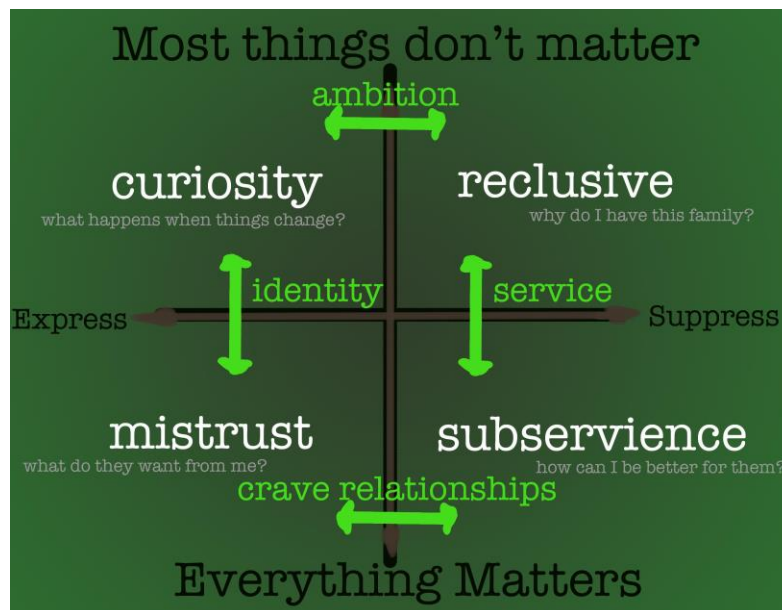
Projecting goes beyond portraying oneself as an ideal. Psychologists such as Ingersol describe how people contain multitudes of "sub-personalities" that satellite around a person's major identity based on their immediate needs and desires. It's a way to materialize a scenario that a person feels is missing and need to explore. Just because someone has learned to push certain energies out of their awareness doesn't mean they don't manifest in other ways. A patient of Ingersol's pushed away her need for her father's love, and pretended not to need anyone so she wouldn't suffer that rejection more than she felt equipped to do so.

Many of Ayn Rand's followers, when interviewed in the documentary of "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," said that they loved the idea of not needing anyone else to fix "society" and be their best selves. And yet, who are they without others? What is Society? They projected their ideals onto the world to feel a sense of empowerment and possibility for problem-solving in a time when technology threatened to take away their agency. Our protagonist creates her friends to push away the idea that she cannot make herself happy. Over the course of time, she resents the major sub-personalities and traits, projecting her frustration onto them because she might never stop craving love from and of others. Partially opaque text in American Typewriter may occasionally betray her inner thoughts.

Playing with the conflicted philosophy of Ayn Rand, I will use art to help the players see themselves and their role in and as society. In *Romantic Manifesto*, Rand wrote, "[Art] tells man, in effect, which aspects of his experience are to be regarded as essential, significant, important.

In this sense, art teaches man how to use his consciousness. It conditions or stylizes man's consciousness by conveying him a certain way of looking at existence."

The four main characters navigate a spectrum of ideologies and conflicting processes for self-worth in terms of society. Through the narrative, players will discover how fulfilling and problematic that can be. Below, I have a flow chart for the four main characters and their general motivations and ideologies to keep in mind while I create the narration. The Mother shifts the most across the barriers, as all the characters originate from the Mother, who is centered in "Reclusive."



In "The Value of Art in BioShock: Ayn Rand, Emotion, and Choice," Jason Rose declares, "Faced with an uncaring universe, human beings need a comprehensive view of existence to function: to integrate values, to choose goals, to maintain the unity and coherence of their lives...to save the Little Sisters or harvest them." The player and the Mother will be faced with a similar conundrum along this spectrum that involves what happens to the garden and Society. In the garden, the player receives affective and narrative rewards, whereas in BioShock, it's usually directly related to energy the player can use to conquer the city of Rapture. The player makes the decision for the Mother, in some ways.

In BioShock, the player is put through scenarios in which they believe they are acting for the common good but are actually an agent in a capitalist feud between two selfish entrepreneurs with no regard for who is harmed in the process. Throughout the game, the player is optioned with "Harvesting" to get extra energy to potentially get stronger immediately or "Saving" which earns love and admiration from little girls who need a protector for the trade-off of a different *kind* of energy for the self that pays off with stronger connections and powers in the long run. Allies can be more powerful than the upgrades, in some cases. The "Invisible Hand" of the designer and what seems like karmic energy is ominous and omnipresent, trickling down to reward the player for behaving a certain way. The Mother struggles with sacrificing her own ambitions to satisfy others and not fully revolving in a selfish pursuit of greatness that society has deemed unhealthy with choices that don't feel like choices at all. The garden/psyches are harvested/nurtured by society and the characters. Atlas symbology and the name itself are currently slotted to appear in my game to emphasize burdens vs benefits.

Part of the spectrum I've developed for these characters is "Everything Matters" or "Almost Nothing Matters," which is more so a cue for the emotional investment the characters make in potentially negative ramifications of interactions and emotions. The Mother and the Friend (note, I will not refer to him as the Father bc that is not how the Mother sees him) think their feelings hold no great meaning to the world. It's irrational to waste energy expecting other people to have regard for their feelings. The Children, on the other hand, demand others be accountable or that they must hold themselves accountable for how others behave. Everything matters. It isn't always altruism vs selfishness in Objectivist philosophy so much as reason rebutting against emotion.

Get to Know the Narrative:

The contemporary fairy tale narrative revolves around a scientific family with the surname “Garden” who live in a secular, suburban American-inspired community. The Mother has an exuberant sister and “pusher” parents who not seem to connect with her, so she develops an imaginary friend to keep up her social skills. This friend understands and elevates her attempts at discovery, but also force her to play outside of her comfort zone. As she grows up, she is dissatisfied with real world social prospects and tries to bring her Friend into reality, a helper who could be her equal and partner, someone who will keep her motivated. Eventually, with Their help, the Mother is able to bring the Friend into reality to the point other people registered their presence, although they interpret different appearances of the same person.

The Friend has no sense of true devotion. They discover things because it is entertaining and they have an insatiable curiosity, their core personality trait and value. They play pranks, they tell jokes, they even make two children with the Mother because sex and procreation are part of discovery, though not one either of them is inclined to do regularly. They are able to pursue their own happiness without envy or sharing, an ideal man in the Randian society, and once others can see them, they are applauded.

The First Child grows up fearful of what they are, of how people react to the very presence of their energy. People watch the Gardens in curiosity and The Elder Child internalizes that, shrinking into themselves, afraid to be anything bad. Their desire to be *subservient* and please others to get happiness is rejected by the society. The Elder Child is passed over at almost every turn, unmemorable. A cog in the machine. They are forgettable, but called upon to be used by others. The First Child has such low self-esteem that they often hide themselves away, trying and failing to summon their own fantastical Friend.

The Second Child takes their place in the world as a thorny miracle, bright and sharp compared to the wilting First. As a child, they pluck the most beautiful and radiant flower from the garden and braid it into their hair in a declaration that they would grow no matter what the situation. Although they have friends and partners, they *do not trust* society and dare it to cross them or even make a demand.

Every choice the player makes in the narrative of the Garden changing will subtly adjust the balance between the four characters based on the grid, with some choices being selfish of the characters whereas others are selfish for society (the role the audience takes). Alternately, the choices can demand altruism in a balance that never feels fully complete until potentially the endings. What does it mean for the Mother to reject her role and leave the garden? Should she? Where does self-worth come from and how does she protect herself from society influencing that? How does it feel when society is manipulated into inflating it? Act One concludes with the garden being overrun, seeping through the cracks in the Mother’s fence.

ART STYLES:

I find the implication of projection and psychology would lend itself well to fitting into the “pages” of the Garden story. In addition to the more straightforward shadow puppets on a stage, I intend to use Rorschach-esque implications with shapes, colors, and texture. Plant/humanoid shadow silhouettes will lend ambiguity to the shapes, race, and appearance of imaginary friends in a way that still makes them identifiable without defining them. I want the audience to be able to project onto the images themselves while still recognizing the avatars, much like in the eery game Limbo.

Unlike the black and white tones of Limbo, the occasional use of color in the scenes of my thesis will use Rorschach theory to evoke moods. During a therapy session, a patient could be shown a complex drawing with multiple textures and colors and asked to interpret the Rorschach. The “what” was not as important as how it made the patient feel. For example, a card designed to gauge how the patient reacts to the idea bodily harm might have touches of red against black to suggest blood. Another card might be considered evocative of “a change of pace” because it was the first card in the series made entirely of color, which some patients may be more welcome to than others.

Below, I have some potential symbols for the garden and humanoid/garden variations of the characters.





Limbo artwork by cyberbunny and others





Have You Heard? Revolutionary Girl Utena, Shadow Puppet Girls

The anime and manga series *Shoujo Kakumei Utena* (SKU) is a contemporary fairy tale that revolves around a middle school girl, Utena Tenjou, who wears a boy's uniform in order to serve society as a "prince." While there, she gets drawn into duels for the fate of the world and the Rose Bride, another student at Ohtori Academy who performs as a "tool" to the top duelist.

Utena is determined to save the world by standing up to injustice and maintaining her “pure” worldview after a Prince gave her hope and compassion when all was lost, only to ultimately realize that her Prince was a toxic, unattainable ideal—a frozen memory she clung to in the hopes she could be great and so could the world, a Randian principle of the Garden.

The Rose Bride lays more on the side of altruism, literally sacrificing herself and her agency as penance for being unable to save the world herself. She wants to be used as a tool to do so, accepting her punishment for the Prince's change with the knowledge she is no savior and everyone suffers.

The Prince could not maintain fighting the world's battles, being an "Atlas," and so became more of a Lucifer/Fallen Angel reigning over a school literally shaped like a coffin, keeping its traumatized students stagnant and yearning for salvation while the Rose Bride tended a garden in a birdcage greenhouse, like the Gardens. The audience often questions The Rose Bride's true affection or indifference for the people who "win" her much like the player will question the affection between the Mother and the companions.

SKU is ripe with garden metaphors, exploration of the self, spirit, love, change, and heroism, much like my thesis. In every episode of the show, there are “Shadow Girls” who tell a story, a hyperbole that ties into the backstories and themes of what’s going on in the main narrative arc. Even though the dramatics are exaggerated, they are often illuminating in their blunt motivations. It appears as though these Shadow Puppet Girls are trying to work within the system of Ohtori Academy to warn the audience/characters of what’s to come, similarly to how the book will work within the game to illuminate the truth for the audience and players.



The Sims 3: Generations

Imaginary Friends

In the third iteration of EA's hit franchise The Sims, an expansion pack brought upon a new "type" of interaction: that of imaginary friends. With this expansion, every toddler was sent a new toy in the mail from a Great-Aunt that would supplement entertainment and social needs into childhood, when it would become a more physical being as opposed to a toy, pushing aside the child's other ambitions and needs to focus on a select few like "fun."

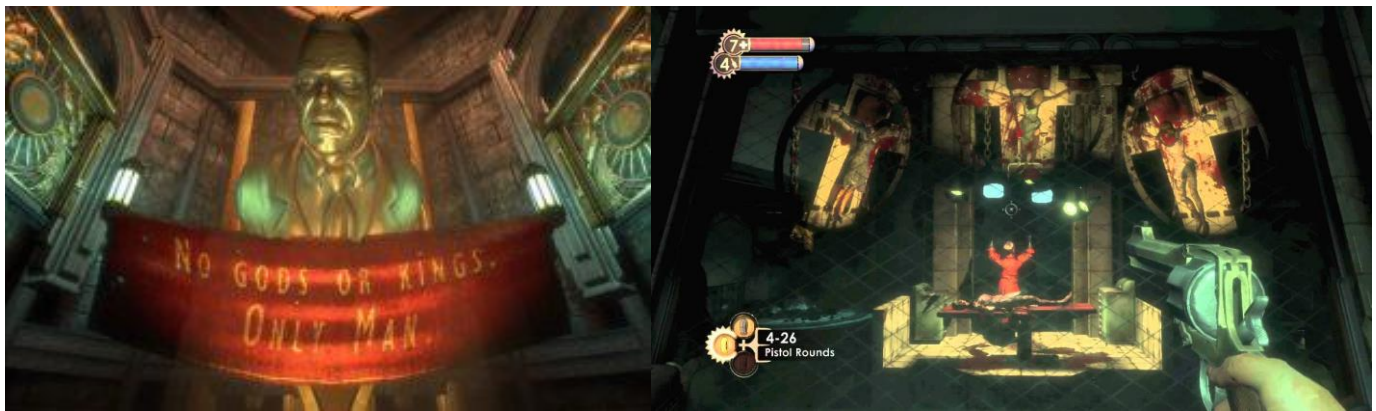
As mentioned earlier, the Mother and children often create "Friends" to explore or cope with something, but it often is a diversionary tactic to push another need out of their awareness or reframe it. The obsession with her Friends keeps her away from real, human relationships, ones that weren't strong or there in the first place, further exasperating her want for those by pretending that she doesn't need them.

If Sim imaginary friends are converted to playable characters, they look (relatively) normal, with a few uncanny quirks. Their behaviors and traits are usually a mix of the bizarre and potentially worthy of alarm (kleptomaniac, insane, hot-headed), which is true of the Friends in our Garden. Their walk often reverts to the toy form exaggerated bounce, such as Mickey Mouse and company used to exhibit in old cartoons, making it clear they were not *always* human. The Garden Friend will have similar uncanny mannerisms. The Children have more human in them, but still retain something not-quite human in the way they bloom, wilt, and interact with the all-human Mother.

The whole life cycle of bonding with an imaginary friend turned actual figure inspired the initial concept of the Gardens. The trait system also played a part in character construction and behaviors in initial sketches.

Atlas Shrugged and other Randian Works

In “Atlas Shrugged,” the main character, John Galt, is an innovator and inventor who decides to create a separate society free of government regulations in a strike of productive individuals against those who would abuse and use them. It advocates reason (loosely termed “rationality” in other Rand texts), individualism, and capitalism while criticizing government and societal suggestion. According to the documentary, “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace,” this was Rand’s magnum opus and meant to validate unique “movers” in the world and critique how viciously they were treated while illuminating her personal philosophy. Ironically, it was critically panned and marked the end of her novelist career and the takeoff of her as a popular figurehead. Her former Collective reported that she had somewhat of a breakdown with society when they rejected and criticized what she considered her life’s most true and rational work. The Mother figure has similar contempt and desire to be accepted by society as someone who is a great mover and innovator of the world, despite them only wanting to see certain products of her ambition and psyche. Other works, such as “The Fountainhead” and “Anthem” explore themes of individualism and compromising one’s values versus giving in to what society deems necessary, which fits into the spectrum of character motivations for the Garden family.



Bioshock

Any game that deals with Objectivist philosophies is bound to come into comparison with Bioshock, whose dystopian Objectivist society is run by an antagonist whose name is an anagram for the famous founding philosopher Ayn Rand. I’ve mentioned some of the parallels above, but the idea of burden vs benefit and roles in society and how people influence you as a person who thinks you have agency all play into the mechanics of the Garden.

The subject matter of my game is heavily rooted in psychology, especially analysis on the Objectivist theories of Ayn Rand, and the causes and effects of imaginary companions. The biggest connecting thread between the two is that imaginary friends are almost always a projection of the self or a missing piece and Ayn Rand, by her own novels,

Most children who create imaginary friends do not necessarily fit the stereotype of shy, super creative, intelligent, and focused children. According to development psychologist Marjorie Taylor's research on how fantasy play affects children, "Many parents report that imaginary companions were created after the birth of the second child in the family, a timing which suggests that the imaginary companion might have been created to help the child cope with the reduced access to parents or the general upheaval that accompanies a new birth." The creation was less about the traits of the child and more about fulfilling a need. Any large gap in ages between siblings or a household absent of others around their age would be an environment likely for a child to create an imaginary companion as a coping mechanism or even an exploratory future. Taylor's work helped reshape people's view of imaginary play into a natural part of development and not as an indicator of mental illness or giftedness.

In families that were accepting of such fantasy play, the imaginary companion often became beloved. Sometimes, entire communities would become acquainted with and attached to characters to the point they mourn their disappearance more than the child. Non-creators might attempt to invade on the play without being invited, which causes stress and potentially disrupts the child's relationship with both real and imaginary companions. For example, a man asked his granddaughter to get her electronic dog companion Nosey to open the garage. Imagine her surprise when the garage actually opened! Taylor noted, "Nosey appeared to have developed purposes and capabilities of his own that were independent of her needs." It defied her expectations of fantasy versus reality with the companion and she never mentioned them again, despite her family's urging to "bring Nosey back." Losing *control* of companions makes them less attractive as playmates, a key thing to remember in terms of the Garden family and how the Mother feels about them as independent beings. How independent are they, anyway? Or are they self-approving methods to protect her self-esteem and self-regard? She did make them, after all. Their achievements are hers, according to one optional take of Society and Randian philosophy.

Empathy and perspective is incredibly important to all growth stages. Some parents encourage and embrace fantasy as part of development whereas others find it indicative of lying or unhealthy behaviors. While Fundamentalists and others worry about negative spiritual interactions as part of imagination, other societies such as Mennonites believe that "personal development must not intrude upon the concerns of the group," as Taylor summarized. Standing out from the crowd and deviating from their future roles in fostering community and families as a whole would lead to pride and sin. Many of these children engage in imaginary play, anyway, not because they are lonely, but because they crave something outside of their reality. For many Mennonite children, their imaginary friend could exist solely to wear fancy clothes or run a shop instead of becoming a farmer or teacher. Private, nonsocial fantasies seemed to be common. For example, one child impersonated or tended to a bird or a unicorn because they wanted to feel free, so the mother kept it a secret from everyone else, under the impression that it was a temporary exploration of feeling.

The Mother in my game will create and not impersonate (her imaginary companions, anyway), but those projections are deeply rooted in raw feeling and yearning for something beyond their reality. The player as Society may disapprove of her deviations from the norm before, during, or what she envisions for a future fantasy, which puts the Mother at the forefront

of Randian philosophy about serving her own happiness as an ingenue as long as she doesn't hurt anybody else, supposedly.

Often, children who create imaginary companions or scenarios will clarify that it's "just pretend" or "isn't real" if they sense others get particularly involved or confused about their scenarios. Many people get attached to other people's imaginary companions and the interesting lives they lead. A. A. Milne, the creator of Winnie the Pooh, found it awkward to explain to people who were upset he hadn't kept his stuffed animals that he'd rather be surrounded by things that made him happy where he was in his life at the moment.

The Mother is not happy with her life. She does love the garden but it doesn't bring her joy. Her major character question is "Why do I (still) have this family?" Society expects her to be happy with what they perceive to be her success: a well-paying job, academic accolades, her own home with a big fence, a husband, and two kids. They approve of her life and want it to stay in the Garden so to speak, but now things are seeping out of that fence. In pursuing her own happiness, much like a Randian hero, she may have to relinquish or change the things she has created to support and question her ego. What is she to do with these projections? Give her family to society? They are all tied to her. Society might hate her for abandoning them or locking them out, yet locking herself away won't make her any happier. The great search for something that *will* make her happy is terrifying but necessary.

According to Taylor, the lack of mourning for an imaginary companion doesn't belittle the importance of those relationships. If the relationship ends prematurely, they can be devastated, whereas if the "invisible" disappear, retire, or meet violent ends, that can be easier to process because the inventor's needs have been met. In a James Day interview with Ayn Rand, she seemed cavalier about her own death, quoting that when she died, the world would end, so why would she care? She had no further needs. "It doesn't concern me in the least, because I won't be here to know it. The worst thing about death, and what I regard as the most horrible human tragedy, is to lose someone you love. That is terribly hard. But your own death? If you're finished, you're finished. My purpose is not to worry about death but to live life now, here on earth."

In the 2011 documentary "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," one of Ayn Rand's devotees, Barbara Brandon, said, "She appealed to everything that was idealist in me. We were heroic. We could tame the world. We could tame nature. We could achieve our goals. We can do what we want. What does it matter that we're alone? What do we need? Why do we need anyone? We have ourselves. And that was for sure enough."

Perhaps we can be enough for ourselves for a time, but certainly not forever.

Although Rand often claimed in interviews that man should have self-esteem without sacrificing their own happiness, her personal life did not live by this credo. She actually had a fairly public affair with Barbara's husband, Nicholas, requiring her follower to sacrifice her own self esteem for Ayn's happiness because "it was only rational that two people attracted to one another gave in to that attraction." Followers defend this choice because the spouses were aware of the spiritual and physical attraction, but it did not make the players any less hurt in the process. After the novel "Atlas Shrugged" was critically panned, Nicholas Brandon became Rand's "tether to reality." Rand's self-esteem depleted, shocking her followers, friends, and fans. When Nicholas took on a new lover, she slapped him three times in front of her assembly of followers and called it a "betrayal," despite speaking of affairs as "rational" responses to attraction between two people when she wanted to have one of her own.

Love, faith, and esteem are not always rational. The human will naturally be irrational at different points in their life, especially under stress. People who are suffering want something as a balm or to give meaning to their pain. Most humans naturally feel the urge to justify and earn their own existence with varying motivations and methods.

Lauren Carpenter did an experiment to create a small-scale version of society with no hierarchy, where people could act independently and there would still be stability and order. Carpenter hooked up bats with red and green sensors and filled a theater where the people could guess which bat/light indicator was theirs based on how they flipped the sensor. Then, the screen switched to a version of Pong where the “bumpers” on either side moved up or down based on the balance of red vs green sensors on each “team.” People played with glee, all without instruction, because they knew their “vote” mattered the same as everyone else’s.

But how long would that joy last before people saw it as futile and started putting down their paddles? Before spoilsports started trying to derail the experiment? Carpenter’s game could technically be played by four people, or even two. As “society,” players will make choices about perception that change the inner balance of the characters more affected by outside perception. For example, one of the prompts will most likely be about the state of the garden and which plant is the most valuable—the beautiful one missing the nutrients of the plain, the regular version, or the cross-bred, which is a mystery. More serious prompts may regard the sex of the first child, where the child itself does not change, but the perception of what it *should* be does, affecting the esteem of the child and the Mother. As these values change, so does the outcome of the story, and the Mother may choose to stay in her caged garden and serve, leave it to fester, burn it down, or any variation therein. The outcome is not as important as the questions the player must ask themselves. How do we nurture or burn away self-esteem as a society and how do these protections and vulnerabilities affect us?

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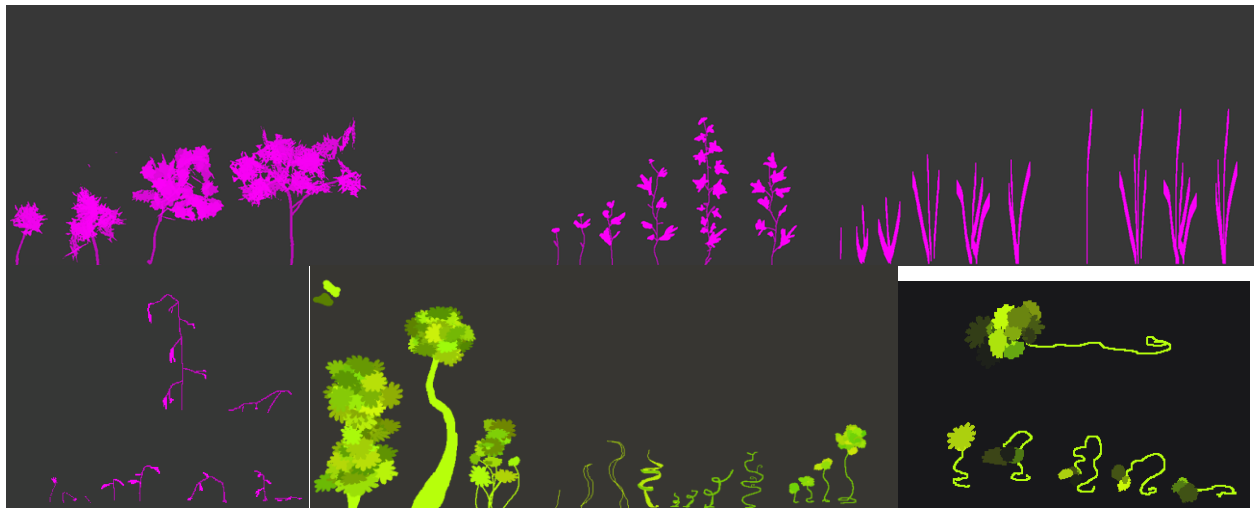
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DEVELOPMENT:

Plants:





Initially the game was going to be more like a shadow puppet show, then an uncanny valley point and click adventure before settling on the colorful paper cutouts more like those out of a storybook to tip the player impressions in curiosity's favor as opposed to mistrust



- Only comes out for special events
- Avoids player
- Tries to hoard seeds and plant or burn them >> this behavior may change based on value-triggered events in game

not properly attached



Recluse

Introverted, self-reliant, observant, studious

The Recluse throws herself into being "productive" with research. Shookled to her projects, the Recluse tries to remain detached from society beyond how her work can influence it because that's where she feels her "value" lies in their eyes and fears being rejected or disappointed by/in them. She carries insufficient protective gear at all times.

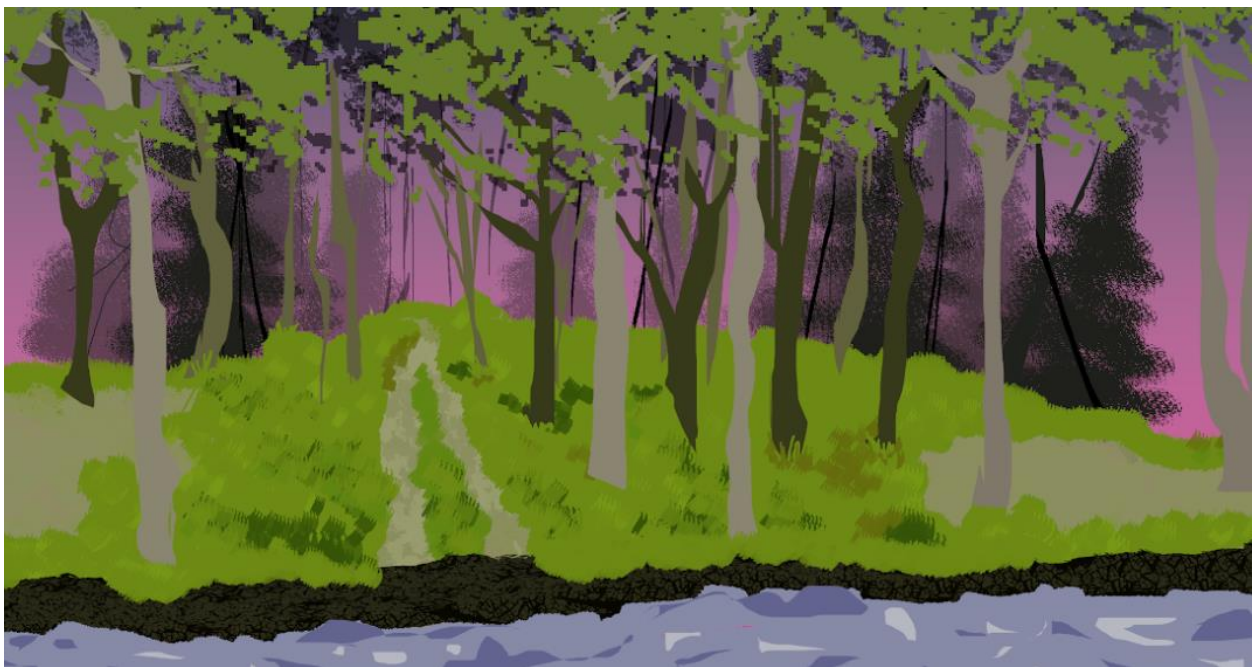
*designs may change - currently planning "realistic" shadow puppet/ancient Greece statue style poses

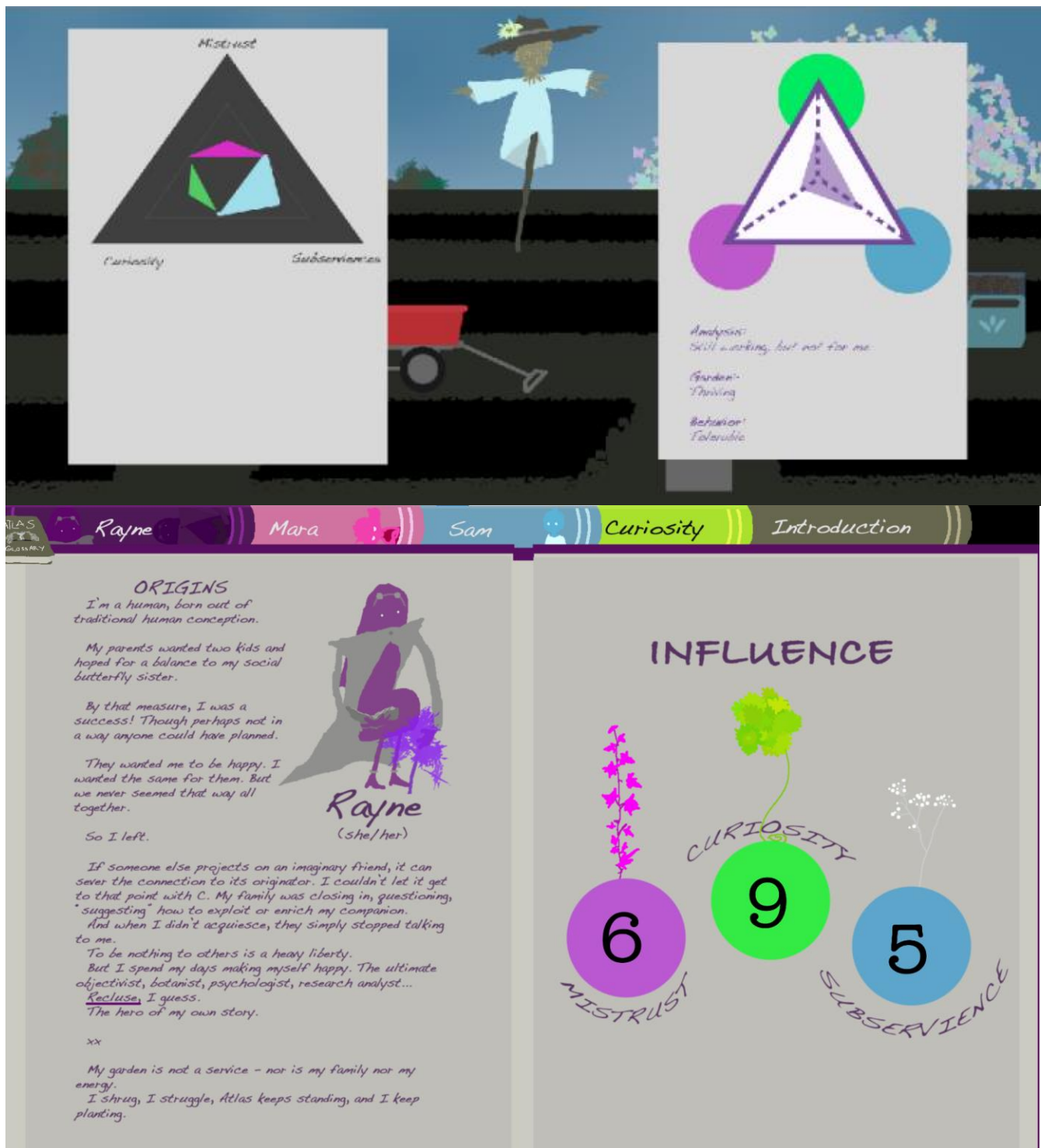


As the only fully human character, a great deal of time went into considering how Rayne should be set apart from the imaginary beings, only for the ultimate design choice to keep her *space* and lack of usable plots as what set her apart from the rest.



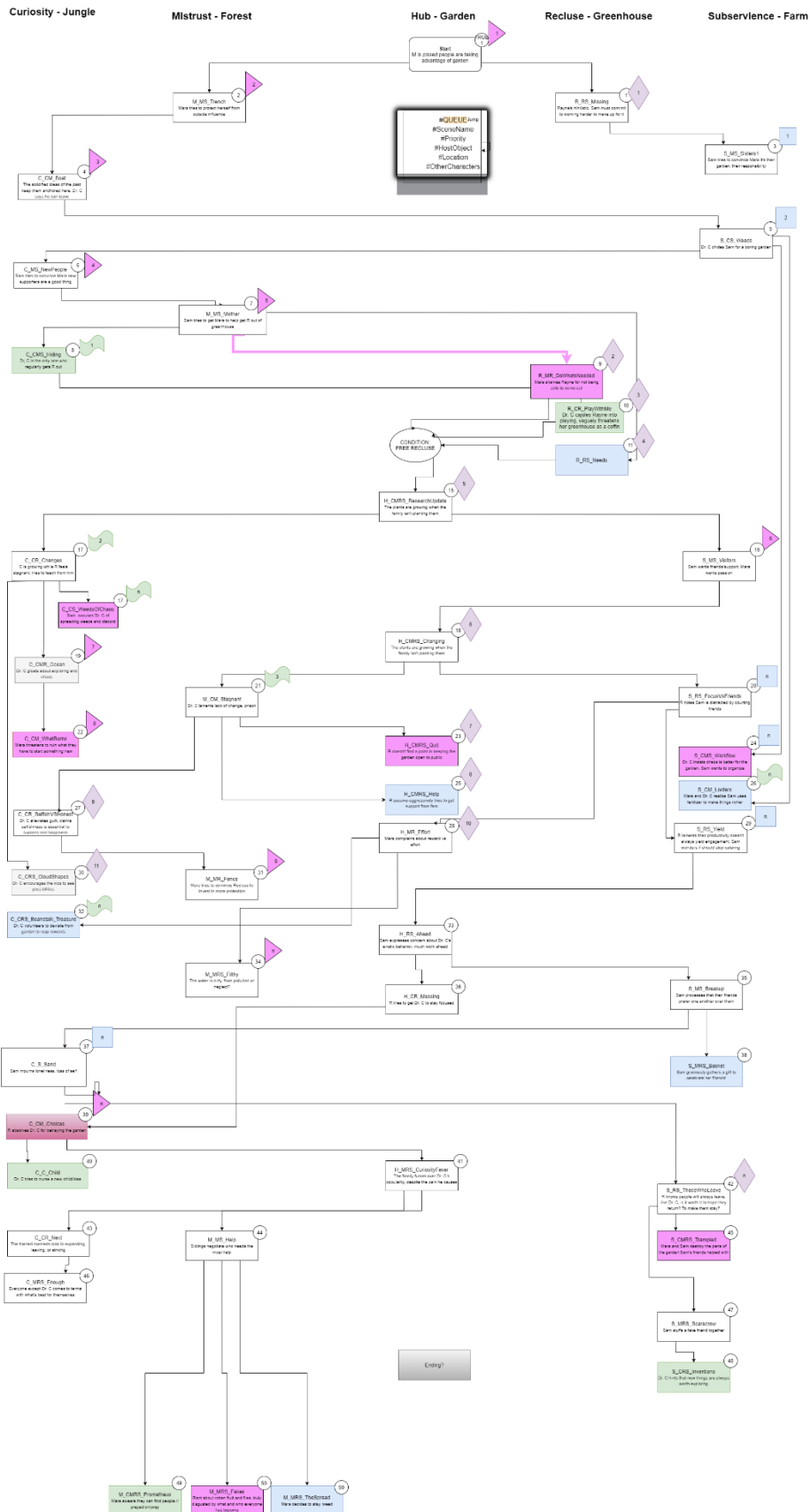
An edited version of this fountain and the plants in the background did make it to the final edition of the game. This was used in a Visual Novel draft where the player was prompted to offer between four options for gifts (Cheers, Flowers, Gems, or Nothing) and asked what they wanted to see in Rayne's imaginary friend upon creation (adventurous, doting, hilarious, etc).







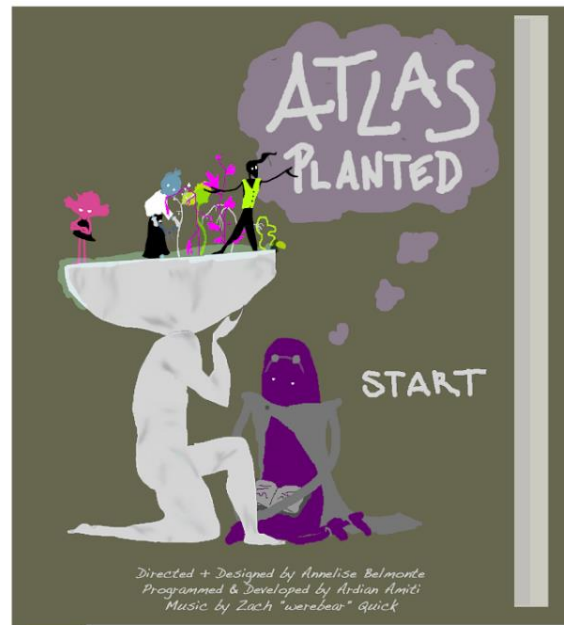
Early stat-tracking design to call to personality tests and trait values vs current system which shows player trait, seed, etc.



APPENDIX 2: SLIDE DECK

Critique and Explore:

- Imaginary Friends
 - Projection
- Social Responsibility
 - The value of investing social currency and energy
- Objectivism + Ayn Rand
 - Ego and Society
- American Dream Ideals
 - Freedom and Prosperity



Imaginary Friends + Projection

"[Art] tells man, in effect, which aspects of his experience are to be regarded as essential, significant, important. In this sense, art teaches man how to use his consciousness. It conditions or stylizes man's consciousness by conveying to him a certain way of looking at existence." – Ayn Rand, "The Romantic Manifesto"



HUMAN/MOTHER
RECLUSE

Rayne

- First developed when realize difference between person and rest of the world
- Mother/caretaker is a separate person
- Transitional object >> Childhood Creativity + Projection



IMAGINARY/FATHER
CURIOSITY

Dr. Curiosity



ENERGY/CHILD
SUBSERVIENCE

Sam

- Explore identity, fears, and desires
- Cannot be controlled, constant in their "character"
- Often a result of dissatisfaction in socialization

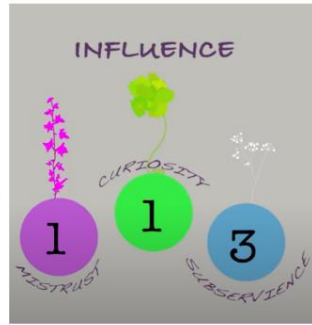
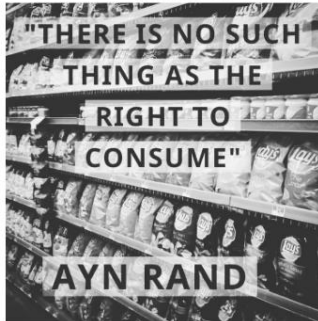


ENERGY/CHILD
MISTRUST

Mara



@aynrand_quotes on Instagram



Social Responsibility

"Cyberspace is a black hole. It absorbs energy and personality and then represents it as an emotional spectacle. It is done by businesses that commodify human interaction and we are getting lost in the spectacle." - *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* Ep. 1

- Game will not provide any more scenes or seeds past a certain point unless players are actively engaging in gardens
- Energy is different for different plants (tail for Mistrust, wilder pattern for Curiosity, slow for Subservience)



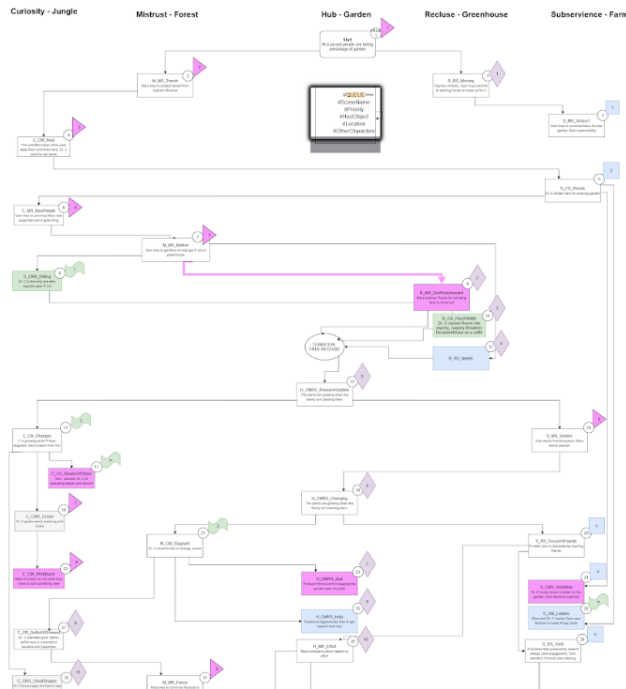
"You want to do it?"

"I might. If you offer me enough."

"Howard—anything you ask. Anything. I'd sell my soul..."

"That's the sort of thing I want you to understand. To sell your soul is the easiest thing in the world. That's what everybody does every hour of his life. If I asked you to keep your soul—would you understand why that's much harder?"

— Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*



Branching Paths

Small dialogue shifts based on influence in most scenes after Act One, Freeing the Recluse. Who helps free her is the first big influence.

By the end, some of the larger "influenced" paths include:

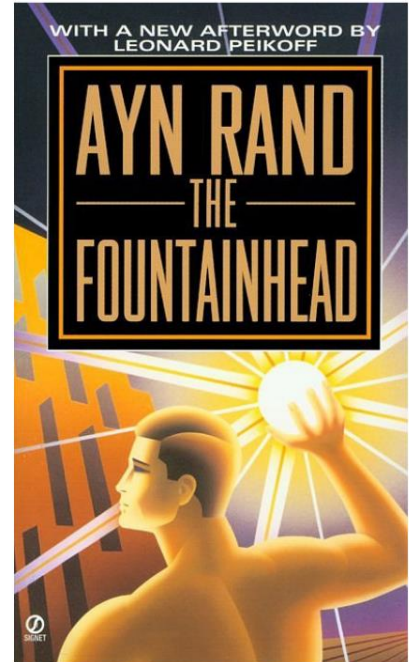
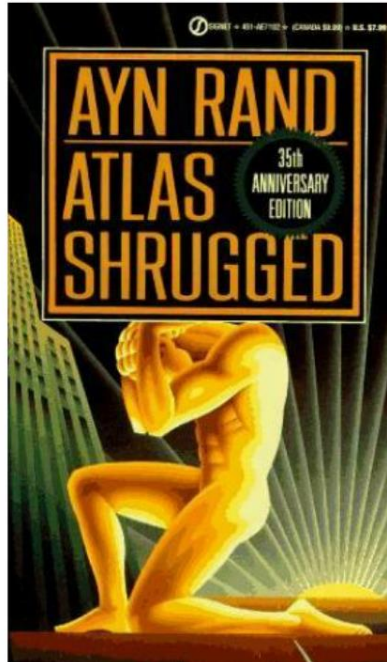
1. The family leaves the garden feeling like they can trust civilization enough to explore
2. Mara/Mistrust burns the garden down
3. Sam/Subservience invites more people in to tend the garden, makes their own imaginary but not living friends
4. The family shuns the player and other gardeners in general

"If you saw Atlas, the giant who holds the world on his shoulders, if you saw that he stood, blood running down his chest, his knees buckling, his arms trembling but still trying to hold the world aloft with the last of his strength, and the greater his effort the heavier the world bore down upon his shoulders - What would you tell him?"

"I...don't know. What...could he do? What would you tell him?"

"To shrug."

— Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*



Objectivism

Player is presented as anonymous potential member of the Collective, a selfish being who can seek reward via gardening and voyeurism, explore at will or leave.

But there are hinted and direct consequences (blocked scenes and plants, no more seeds) for not respecting others' virtues even though the characters clearly think some are superior to others.

Characters often philosophize around Objectivist ideals -- often indirectly referring to the player and gardening mechanics

"Nothing is given to man on earth except a potential and the material on which to actualize it."

The Objectivist Ethics
— Ayn Rand

"Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible, it's yours."

Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*

@aynrand_quotes on Instagram

"My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with **productive achievement** as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute."

— Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*



"She appealed to everything that was idealist in me. We were heroic. We could tame the world. We could tame nature. We could achieve our goals. We can do what we want. What does it matter that we're alone? What do we need? Why do we need anyone? We have ourselves. And that was for sure enough."

— "Collective" Member, *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*



American Foundations

- "Life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to **ability or achievement** regardless of social class or circumstances of birth."

—James Adams, "The Epic America"
- "All men are created equal" with the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

—The Declaration of Independence
- The **Statue of Liberty** is officially named *Liberty Enlightening the World*
- You can be successful if you work hard and live morally



WELCOME

Notes by Rayne, aka "Mother"



My garden allows space to pursue energies, desire, and success without harming anyone else.

The plants here aren't born of typical seeds. They require "energy" - that special glow of inspiration and gardening.

I used it to create imaginary friends and brought them to this reality as my family.

Now they -- and you -- tend for me.

Drag seeds to available plots



Harvest plants by plucking the base of a mature plant.

Planting affects the main caretaker of that section of garden, so tread lightly.

We will not acknowledge your work directly. If it's unacceptable, you will be forced to leave.

Happy planting.

Players can navigate, garden, collect seeds, or observe the family



Game Themes

- Harvesting and planting energy as part of a feedback loop
 - cross-pollinating emotions and plants
- The impact of social and selfish responsibilities
 - Balancing values + branching narratives
- Indirect interaction amidst isolation
 - The characters treat the player as an invisible audience like a live theater production
 - "How do my actions matter?"

The Team

Annelise Belmonte
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ART + STORY

Annelise is a Game Design MFA and published romance author with a focus in Narrative Design. As a symbolism superfreak and dystopian disaster child, the dramatic themes of ego and capitalism danced in her head until she let them out to play and gave them rules within this game.

Faculty Advisors: Caleb Foss, Peter McDonald, and Anna Anthropy

Ardi Amiti
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PROGRAMMING + AI

Ardi is a Game Design MFA with background in UX/UI, AI Implementation, memory management, and debugging. As a film buff, dungeon master, and creative writing undergrad he is also equipped to successfully plan and implement evolving character and UI behaviors with Annelise.

REFERENCES/INSPIRATION

Dale Chihuly, Glass Blowing Art – Chihuly Garden and Glass



Don't Starve

